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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DUBAI 002049

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SUBJECT: CONCEPT OF GOVERNANCE IN IRAN (C-NE5-01218)

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CLASSIFIED BY: Jason L. Davis, Consul General, Dubai, UAE.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

1.(C) Summary: For the most part, both Iranian contacts and visa applicants believe that Iran's central government in Tehran has the most impact on their lives. Government and politics, however, do not play a large role in their day-to-day lives. End summary.

2.(C) In recent months, Conoff has spoken to a number of visa applicants and ConGen Dubai Iranian contacts regarding their concepts of governance, in relation to Iran, and the importance of government and politics in their lives. All but two responded that they viewed the central government in Tehran as the most having the most impact on their lives, but all also noted that government and politics in general do not play important role in their day-to-day lives. Of the two who believed that other levels of government were more important than Tehran, one thought the provincial level was most important, while the other stated that the local level was the most important.

3.(C) A sociology professor at Azad University observed that the Iranian government is "very centralized." As a result, he claimed, there is a great deal of focus on Tehran and less focus on provincial or local governments. Nonetheless, local councils have been effective because educated members, including engineers and professors, have been elected to serve. Consequently, they have been able to help mayors with planning and other programs at the local level.

4.(C) A Tehran University archaeology professor who spends most of his time on archaeology digs stated that, for the "average Iranian," the most important level of government is Tehran. He claimed, however, there was a difference between academics and "normal people." He implied that academics had greater expectations from government and political leaders.

5.(C) An Iranian who runs a grain mill told Conoff that the most important level of government is Tehran. His wife and daughters claimed that Tehran was the most important because that is where laws are made and, for the most part, implemented. They also commented that they view Iran as a democracy, pointing out that they vote for both the president and Majlis representatives. The daughters noted, however, that democracy as a concept is not taught in their school.

6.(C) A longtime Iranian resident of Dubai claimed that "politics is not important for Iranians." Soon after Ahmadinejad

was elected, she claimed, a nationwide survey of Iranians was taken concerning the election. The majority of the respondents reportedly could neither provide the name of Ahmadinejad as the new president nor identify his picture.

7.(C) A young trader at the Tehran Stock Exchange told Conoff that government, no matter what the level, does not play a large role in Iranians' day-to-day lives. Most people, he claimed, do not even know who their mayor or local council members are. He stated that unless a mayor or local council member does "something great for them," such local politicians don't play "a big role" in Iranians' lives.

Karbaschi Held as Example of a Good Leader

8.(C) Karbaschi's name came up repeatedly when Conoff discussed governance with visa applicants and ConGen Dubai Iranian contacts. Many specifically mentioned that during Karbaschi's tenure as Tehran mayor a number of new roads and a freeway were built, which helped alleviate, to a small extent, Tehran's horrible traffic problems. A young trader on the Tehran Stock Exchange told Conoff that "everybody" knew Karbaschi. They saw him achieve and get things done. The trader thought it ironic that Karbaschi was subsequently put in prison for corruption.

9.(C) While Supreme Leader Khamenei and President Ahmadinejad are by now undeniably familiar to most Iranians, their speeches are -- to varying degrees -- apparently not considered good dinner fare. When PolEconoff dined at a Dubai Iranian restaurant on the eve of the Iranian new year (Noruz), both Supreme Leader Khamenei and Ahmadinejad came on Iranian television during the course of the evening. When Supreme Leader Khamenei came on the channel, restaurant patrons quietly and calmly changed the channel; but when Ahmadinejad came on, however, the mostly Iranian crowd got visibly angry and scrambled to find a new channel, eventually opting for music videos over Iranian television.

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Ahmadinejad's Performance as a Leader

10.(C) Many contacts seem convinced that Ahmadinejad's religious beliefs play a role in his decision-making. According to an Iranian political and economic analyst who recently spoke to PolEconChief, Ahmadinejad believes he has a mandate from God to protect the revolution and bring about social justice. This belief, he argued, distracts Ahmadinejad from day-to-day governance and could lead to corruption. A close Consulate contact, who worked in the Tehran Mayor's Office before coming to Dubai, told PolEconoff and Conoff he had briefly worked under Ahmadinejad during his tenure as Tehran mayor. He said he knew within one month that he needed to find a new job, and responded by moving his family to Dubai. He called Ahmadinejad "crazy," and clarified that he meant it in the truest sense of the word. He claimed that decisions made by Ahmadinejad were "proof enough of his craziness," but did not elaborate further.

11.(C) A Tehran-based Iranian businessman said Ahmadinejad elected as a "populist president." He is currently traveling to different provinces with his cabinet to maintain this image with the Iranian public. According to Iranian press reports, Ahmadinejad and his cabinet have visited 10 of Iran's 28 provinces as of March 26. These trips are reportedly part of Ahmadinejad's initiative of "bringing the government closer to the people." This contact does not believe that the Iranian public -- especially those who voted for Ahmadinejad -- are dissatisfied with his performance so far. Some may be dissatisfied, though, as they have thus far seen no improvement in their economic situation. On the contrary, the economic situation in Iran has deteriorated under Ahmadinejad, according to multiple Iranian contacts. According to an Esfahan University professor, who investigates fraud and corruption cases for the provincial court in his spare time, Ahmadinejad is not keeping

his campaign promises and he doesn't seem to care.

11.(C) Comment: Given the intensity with which the average Iranian seems to follow politics and current affairs, it is interesting that so many are claiming that politics and government play only a marginal role in their lives. Perhaps this is rooted in the widespread perception that Iranian politicians are hopelessly venal and corrupt; in some cases the disengagement may also be survival tactic -- a way to stay safe in the current political and social climate in Iran.

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